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ABSTRACT

Classroom exercises designed to help students learn phonetic symbols more effectively are described. The exercises were developed for use in a Hong Kong school. The idea behind their creation was that use of the symbols in communicative situations would emphasize their utility for learning English pronunciation. Each exercise uses contextualized tasks that are not limited to language learning. The first requires students to transcribe the names in a letter written to a pen pal; the second has students answer a questionnaire in an activity designed for students to get to know each other; the third involves transcribing signs to assist and extra-terrestrial being visit a park; in the fourth, students order vegetables from a greengrocer. Variations on each exercise are suggested. Worksheets and visual aids used in the exercises are appended. A brief bibliography is included. (MSE)

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PRACTISING ENGLISH PHONETIC SYMBOLS IN A COMMUNICATIVE WAY

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INTRODUCTION

Learning an inventory of phonetic symbols of a language involves some practice of recognizing and transcribing of the phonetic symbols. However, this kind of practice has received little attention in the teaching of pronunciation to second language learners. Many drills provided in classrooms tend to be dry and mechanical. In this paper, I will report on my attempt of making learning the inventory of English phonetic symbols a functional and interesting exercise.

BACKGROUND

The students in my speech classes were teacher trainees whose electives were subjects other than English. But they had to attend language skills classes which was a complementary component of the curriculum. 'Basic Speech' is one of the courses for the second year classes I taught. They had already learned the English phonetic symbols and some initial strategies of producing connected speech in their first year course. My work is to help them revise, and reinforce the knowledge of phonetics and further develop their listening skills. The students reflected at the beginning of the course that they did not feel that learning English phonetic symbols were useful to them. Neither were the drills of transcription and recognition interesting to them. They also queried if they would have the same materials recycled in the same mode of learning.

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Many teachers and writers may assume that there is no better way in assimilating phonetic symbols than learning them by heart. Out-of -context classroom drills like chunks of single word transcription and sentential recognition of phonetic symbols make learners suffer a mental strain at the threshold of learning the sound system of English. In this way, learners may be demotivated by the mechanical and dry exercises. Trim (1975) tries to make recognition and transcription of English phonetic symbols interesting and less difficult to beginners by supplying illustrations in the exercises. Yet it is a fact that many practice books and course books on English pronunciation,e.g. O'Connor (1989), Rogerson and Gilbert (1990), Bowen and Marks (1992), and Baker (1993) cover many aspects of English pronunciation, except the learning and practice of phonetic symbols. Very few activities and suggestions are provided on the activities of recognizing and transcribing.

As there were no readily usable books to meet my needs, so I had to create materials which would make revision of phonetic symbols a rewarding experience. My belief is that form follows function. If we can make students see the need of using phonetic symbols in some communicative activities, they will know that the inventory of phonetic symbols is a meaningful set of tools to us in English pronunciation. So I started to devise practice materials of the phonetic symbols in the direction of the contextualized activities.

THE CONTEXT IN PHONETICS

The context on which a task is based is a very important factor in my design of communicative activities. According to Harmer (1987), contexts can be divided into three main areas: first, the classroom; second, situations,i.e. events in which we list such things as participants, and setting etc; and third, formulated information,i.e. information presented in the form of charts, graphs and maps etc.

Morris-Wilson (1984) attempted to put practising phonetic transcription and recognition in a context. His exercises require guesswork. Learners need to read chunks of transcription if they want to learn certain information in anecdotes, memorable quotations, children's rhymes, and riddles etc. Learners are eager to go to the exercises. But the information-loaded contexts chosen are not fully utilized in communicative way. These tasks do not spark off the use of intelligence and imagination of the second language learners. Still, a learner's job is just to encode: to transcribe; or decipher: to recognize phonetic symbols.

Among the task that I am going to describe in details in the following paragraphs, the contexts are of various nature, not limited to texts of verbal arts as in Morrison-Wilson's. Task one requires students to tackle the names in a letter written to a pen pal. Task two requires students to answer a questionnaire in a get-to-know-each-other gathering. Both contexts are simulated

real-life ones (use Harmer's terminology). The place names used in the letter are real ones found in Hong Kong. The content of the questionnaire is personal in nature. Both kinds of information is familiar, yet not immediately attainable, unless the students manage to finish the transcription and recognition exercises. These two pieces of materials are original whilst the materials in the third task is an adaptation of, or a new use of the pictorial materials found in Ur(1991). As the verbal explanation given in the book is crucial to the understanding of the signs, I thus made this crucial part a hurdle for the students to jump over to reach the destination: matching explanation with signs.

I have just illustrated a fact that all kinds of context are usable in the practice of phonetic symbols if they are information-loaded: Situation (task one and two), formulated information (task three). The context of classroom is also used (variation two in task two).

SAMPLES OF SOME ACTIVITIES

The activities I implemented in my classes have the following points in common.

a. Students need to retrieve their initial kowledge of the English phonetics, i.e.discrete sounds, stress, strong and weak forms, assimilation, elision, linkage etc.

b. The texts used cover various contexts. I have tried to devise real-life contexts in which students will very likely find in daily communication.

c. The tasks elicit the creativity and imagination of students.

d. In order to meet the mixed ability and interest of the students, the tasks allow for variations.

To illustrate what I have discussed, I give below a description of the tasks I tried on in my classes.

1) **A LETTER TO A PEN PAL**

Activity type: reading a letter

Objective: Students are able to fill in the blanks in a personal letter with the correct words.

Materials: a letter (Appendix I), a word list (Appendix II)

Instructions:

1. Students work in pairs.

2. Student A has a letter. The body of the letter is gapped with blanks of names (roads, streets, surnames) used in Hong Kong.

3.Student B has a list of names, some of which are

distractors.

4. Student A should read the letter to student B. When reaching the blanks, student A should try to read the phonetic transcription as accurately as he or she can.

5. When student B hears a target word, he or she should try to pick out the right words from his or her list. He or she then spells the word to student A for the latter to write down in the blank.

6. After each pair has finished, the teacher may go through the answers with the class. The students should then compare and see if they have got the most correct answers.

This activity requires student A to pronounce accurately and student B to listen carefully. Student A has to have a knowledge of the strategies in the production of connected speech in English,e.g. elision: Bonham /'bɒnəm/, Salisbury /'sɔlzbərɪ/.

As there are distractors like words of the same initial consonant clusters, the task poses difficulties to the listener. This activity is the type of information gap and the completion of the task relies on the cooperation of the partners.

VARIATION: The materials can be modified to be a cloze passage to gear to a self-paced practice. In this case, a word list is provided. The teacher may teach the class the pronunciation of the list of words before handing out the worksheet. The students will then read the transcription in the worksheet and select a word for each blank. For brighter students, the teacher may

withdraw the word list and let them spell the words with their knowledge of English spelling.

2. **A GAME IN A GETTING-TO-KNOW**

Activity type: answering a questionnaire

Objective: Students are able to read and understand the questions presented in phonetic transcription and give appropriate responses.

Materials: Three versions of a questionnaire (Appendix III)

Instructions:

1. The class is divided into three teams. Members from each team will be given a question about personal particulars. Questions for the three teams are different in content. But all questions are presented in phonetic transcriptions.

2. Students move about in the classroom and interview students of the other teams with his or her own questions. An interviewer may be asked to be interviewee by his or her classmates he or she is interviewing. When he or she has finished with five respondents , he or she can sit down and the last student to sit down will be the loser.

3. The teacher may demonstrate the task by tackling a questions to give students the idea of an appropriate response. For example, 'pɑ:ts hɪz /hɔ'heɔ:n ðə 'mɪdl'/ (parts his/her hair in the middle) requires a yes/no answer. If an irrelevant answer like 'That is true' is given, this shows that the interviewer has not understood the content of the questions, and also has problems with the recognition of English phonetic symbols.

VARIATION 1:

To sustain the interest of students, the teacher may also ask students to form groups and devise their own version of questionnarie on the following topics: health, hobbies, general knowledge. The groups have to produce the questionnaires in phonetic transcription, and hand it to the teacher for monitoring and modifying. In the next lesson, students will ask the opposing groups the prepared questions in the class.

VARIATION 2:

This activity may also be a game of giving directives. Students are split into two teams, each writing physical directives in phonetic transcription for the other team. The teacher has to check the accuracy of the transcription before the game begins. Each member of the two teams must implement one directive. It is necessary for each team to write enough directives for the opposing team to perform. Group effort to decipher the directive is allowed. Each team will take turns to perform one directive at a time. For example, if a team reads /ˈgəʊ tɔ ðə ˈfrʌnt əv ðə ˈruːm and ˈreɪz jɔː raɪt ˈhænd / and sends a member to perform this within a time limit, they will win a round. No verbal performance is needed. Ten points will be given to the team. In the end, the teams will count the points they have gained and see which one has done better. This competition enhances cooperation and is communicative in nature.

3. **MESSAGES BEHIND THE SIGNS: HELPING AN E.T.TO VISIT IN A PARK**

Activity type: Tackling the messages of some signs in order to enable an E.T. friend to visit a country park.

Objective: Students are able to read the transcription of some signs and transcribe some words of signs into English phonetic symbols.

Materials: Key to meanings of signs (Appendix IV)

Pictures of signs (Appendix V)

Instructions:

1. Students work in pairs. They meet an extra-terrestrial being in a country park. It wants to tour the park. There are signs in the park which are not comprehensible to it, which may cause danger and/ or inconvenience it. It is deaf so it cannot hear you. But it has an electronic equipment which can read phonetic symbols and translate them into its own language.

2. Each pair of students is given a sheet of key to meanings of the signs and a set of pictures of signs.

3. The students will read the cards with words which are partly transcribed and try to transcribe the whole text. They then have to match the words with the right signs by putting the English letter of a suitable item beside the Arabic number of the corresponding signs.

4. If the students have finished, they then check the answers with the teacher. The task capitalizes on the knowledge of

phonetic symbols of students and then their common knowledge with facilities in the park. Some signs may be ambiguous, e.g. both no.1 and no.6 give the implication of 'no entry'. Students have to match the verbal and the visual signals in this activity.

4.**Green delivery**

Activity type: ordering and delivering green grocery.

Objective: Students will be able to transcribe and recognize words of vegetables. Students will be able to spell the words of vegetables and pick the picture cards of some vegetables correctly.

Materials: Sets of word cards (Appendix VI), shopping memo pad (Appendix VII) and grocer's note (Appendix VIII), and picture cards (Appendix IX) for each group.

Instructions:

1. 1. Students work in groups of three---SA (student),SB (student B), SC (student C). They are seated at different parts of the classroom.
2. Each student takes on a different role and task.

   SA: Mr./Mrs. Chan (at home): He/ she has a set of vegetable names given by the teacher. He/ she is going to purchase some of these items. After making the choice, he/ she runs to SB with the list.

   SB: The spouse(at home): he/ she has to transcribe the words of vegetables into phonetic symbols as quickly as he/ she

can on the shopping order form. Accuracy is also emphasized as well. Then he/she has to fax the form to the grocer (on foot)

SC: The green grocer (in the shop): upon receiving the order, he/ she will immediately 'decode' the list of transcription and write the English words of vegetables on his note pad. Finally. he/ she has to pick the ordered vegetables from a set of picture cards and deliver them to SA.

3. SA and SC will check if the correct goods are delivered. The word list of SA and the picture cards of SC will be displayed on a table for the teacher to have a final checking.

4. The first team to finish all steps will get ten points. The second team will get eight points. The other teams will get no points. But each correct delivery of a piece of vegetable will bring two points to a group.

5. The skills of transcribing and recognizing phonetic symbols are crucial to the success of the activity. This game proved to be competitive and exciting as the speedy completion demands cooperation of the team members.

8. In order to make each student have the opportunity to order the goods and transcribe and recognize the phonetic symbols, the game will be played three times. Students will take turns to be SA, SB, and SC. Each team will accumulate points gained in each round. In this way, winners may get greater sense of achievement.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The students appeared to be enthusiastic with the activities, especially the games of giving directives and green grocery. They made every effort to solve the problems involved in the contexts. This shows that dynamics in classroom has a high motivating force. English phonetic practice which has long been given the impression of a sort of sedantary activity should receive a new treatment. Moreover, these information-loaded tasks give reasons for the students to transcribe and recognize phonetic symbols. In the process of attaining missing information, students have also acquired a firm knowledge of English phonetic symbols. Finally, teachers should bear in mind that when setting phonetic symbols practice, cultural-specific scenarios should be employed first in the determination of contexts because they are more accessible than the other sources of lexis to the students.

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All about me and my family

Student A's worksheet

The following is the first letter you write to your penpal. You carelessly forget the spelling of some words, but you can pronounce them accurately. Work with Student B to put the spellings back in the blanks in the letter.

Next to each blank, phonetic transcription of the word is given to you so as to help you read accurately to Student B. Student B will look for the right word in his/ her word list and spell the word for you to write in the blank.

Dear Susan,
How are you? Let me tell you something about me and my
families. I was born in the seventies when Sir _____ /mæklhəvz/
was the Governor of Hong Kong. I used to live in _____
/ˈtʃætəm/ Road in Hung Hom and travel to school on _____
/ˈbʊnəm/ Road whis is near the University of Hong Kong.
Now I work as a marketing executive and my office is in
_____ /ˈlɛɪtn/ Centre in Causeway Bay. I have a stroll in
_____ /ˈtʃɛɪtə/ Garden every evening in Queensway. On
Sundays my families and I will do shopping on _____ /ˈnɛɪθən/
Road in Mong Kok. The Space Museum is a good place to visit
and it is situated on _____ /ˈsɔːlzbərɪ/ Road in Tsim
Sha Tsui.
My younger sister is a girl guide. My father runs a toy
shop on _____ / kʊk/ Street. My mother has her flower
shop on _____ /ˈkæmərən/ Road.
I must stop writing here. Tomorrow will be a busy day
for me. Write to me soon.
With best wishes,
Yours sincerely,
(Your name)

Appendix II

All about me and my family

Student B's worksheet

Student A has a letter to a penpal. Student A has forgotten the spelling of some words. But he/ she can pronounce the words.
Please help him/ her to finish the letter by supplying the words in the blanks of the letter.

Here you have a word list. Listen to Student A reading the letter.When he/ she reaches a blank, he/ she will slow down and read the forgotten word accurately (twice?) to you. Search your word list and spell the one you think correct to him/her.

Lockhart	Wellington	Chater	Lugard
Bowen	Leighton	Chatham	Salisbury
Cooke	Sassoon	Murray	Nathan
Kimberley	Cameron	Morrison	Bonham
Club	Stubbs	MacLehose	Newton

QUESTIONNAIRE

Version 1:

Name of interviewee: Are you the person who:
1. 'pa:ts hɪz/ hə 'heə ɪn ðə 'mɪdl
2. Iz 'weərɪŋ 'dʒi:nz
3. gəvz 'dʒɪrgɪŋ 'regjʊlələɪ
4. bɪ'li:vz ɪn 'gəʊsts
5. 'ri:dz mɔ: ðən 'wʌn bʊk ə wi:k

Version 2:

Name of interviewee: Are you the person who:
1. Iz 'weərɪŋ ə 'rɪŋ/ 'Iə — rɪŋz
2. 'ɔ:fn tʃu:z 'tʃu:ɪŋgʌm
3. həz 'nəʊ 'hɒbɪ
4. 'heɪts i:tɪŋ 'vedʒtəblz
5. Iz verɪ 'tɔ:l

Version 3:

Name of interviewee: Are You the person who:
1. laɪks menɪ ˈfɪlm staːz
2. nəʊz haʊ tə ˈspel ˈnesəsərɪ
3. faɪndz ˈtreɪnz ˈkʌmfətəbl
4. laɪks tə tiːtʃ ˈɪŋglɪʃ mərst
5. həs bɔːt ˈmenɪ peəz əv naɪs ʃuːz ˈriːsəntlɪ

Messages Behind the Signs

Key to the meaning of signs

Look at the table below. It is a key to meanings of signs.
The messages are partly transcribed only.
Work together and make the text completely transcribed.

A) / kəʊld / spring	K) / pɑ:kɪŋ /
B) /pɪ'destrɪən krɒsɪŋ/	L) /kæmpɪŋ/ site
C) / nəʊ smɔʊkɪŋ /	M) /stɒp /, /nəʊ/ entry
D) nature / treɪl /	N) /dɒgz / allowed
E) direction / tə bɪ 'fɒləʊd	O) camera / pɔɪnt /
F) /'pɔɪsn /	P) /pɑ:s/ either /saɪd/
G) /dəʊnt/ drink / ðə 'wɔ:tə/	Q) telephone
H) /wɔ:tə spɔ:ts/ area	R) tourist /æk'tɪvətɪz/
I) / smɔʊkɪŋ/ permitted	S) /pʊt əʊt kæmp'faɪəd
J) /'deɪndʒə /	T) stairs, /ʌp and dəʊn /

Appendix V

Messages Behind the Signs

Pictures of the Signs

You have finished reading the phonetically transcribed messages. Now try to match the pictures of the signs with the messages. Write the English letter of the message in the bracket beside the number of the appropriate picture.

1 ( )	6 ( )	11 ( )	16 ( )
2 ( )	7 ( )	12 ( ) P	17 ( )
3 ( )	8 ( )	13 ( )	18 ( )
4 ( )	9 ( )	14 ( )	19 ( )
5 ( )	10 ( )	15 ( )	20 ( )

* Pictures adapted from Ur (1991)

Student A's Word Cards

potato	broccoli	corn
papaya	carrot	lettuce
onion	tomato	celery
spinach	cucumber	beans
pumpkin	cabbage	peas

Green Delivery

Student B's shopping memo pad

Transcribe the words Student A has given into English phonetic symbols in the box below. Then rush this to Student C.

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.